

Income generating activities of people who inject drugs

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Abstract

Background: Injection drug users (IDU) commonly generate income through prohibited activities, such as drug dealing and sex trade work, which carry significant risk. However, little is known about the IDU who engage in such activities and the role of active drug use in perpetuating this behavior.

Methods: We evaluated factors associated with prohibited income generation among participants enrolled in the Vancouver Injection Drug Users Study (VIDUS) using logistic and linear regression. We also examined which sources of income respondents would eliminate if they did not require money to pay for drugs.

Results: Among 275 IDU, 145 (53%) reported engaging in prohibited income generating activities in the past 30 days. Sex work and drug dealing accounted for the greatest amount of income generated. Non-aboriginal females were the group most likely to report prohibited income generation. Other variables independently associated with prohibited income generation include daily heroin injection (AOR = 2.3) and daily use of crack cocaine (AOR = 3.5). Among these individuals, 68 (47%) indicated they would forgo these earnings if they did not require money for illegal drugs, with those engaged in sex trade work (62%) being most willing to give up their illegal source of income.

Conclusion: These findings suggest that the costs associated with illicit drugs are compelling IDU, particularly those possessing markers of higher intensity addiction, to engage in prohibited income generating activities. These findings also point to an opportunity to explore interventions that relieve the financial pressure of purchasing illegal drugs and reduce engagement in such activities, such as low threshold employment and expansion of prescription and substitution therapies.

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, society has attempted to discourage psychoactive drug use by employing a range of law enforcement tactics. These approaches have been shown to inflate the price of illegal drugs. The high costs associated with illegal substances may deter and regulate drug use among certain individuals (Benson et al., 2001); however, other drug users may resort to various forms of prohibited activities, including drug dealing, sex trade work and acquisitive crime to generate sufficient income to support

their preferred level of drug consumption (Casavant and Collin, 2001; Benson et al., 1992; Brochu et al., 1999; Haynes, 1998; Nurco, 1987).

Past investigations have established a strong link between drug dependency and prohibited income generating activities (Stevens et al., 2003; Sherman and Latkin, 2002; Fischer et al., 2001; Deschenes and Anglin, 1991; Silverman and Spruill, 1977). High levels of prohibited activity have also been found to coincide with periods of heavy drug consumption (Grapendaal et al., 1995; Nurco et al., 1985; Ball et al., 1983). Additionally a lack of employable job skills, past criminal histories and high profits derived from drug dealing have been identified as factors influencing substance dependent individuals to engage in prohibited income generating behavior (Sherman et al., 2006; Rothbard et al., 1999; Bretteville-Jensen and Sutton, 1996; Hammersley et al., 1989).

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Prohibited income generating activities have a number of potential negative impacts on individuals and society. In 2002 the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse found that in Canada over 20% of federal inmates report that they committed their most serious offence in order to obtain illegal drugs (Pernanen et al., 2002). The costs of incarcerating substance addicted individuals for their criminal income generating acts is only one aspect of the negative social impacts of this phenomenon. Theft, fraud and other types of acquisitive crime financially burden society and activities that surround drug dealing have been associated with public nuisances and increased drug consumption by making illegal substances readily available (Bretteville-Jensen and Sutton, 1996). Additionally, confrontations related to the illegal drug market account for the majority of violent interactions involving drug users (Casavant and Collin, 2001; Erickson, 2001; Caulkins and Reuter, 1996), making drug dealing a dangerous activity.

Involvement in the sex trade industry is also associated with significant health risks and social costs. In Canada the sale of sexual services between consenting adults is legal; however, provisions regarding bawdy houses, procuring and communicating make many of the acts surrounding sex trade work illegal. In turn sex trade workers operate in an inherently dangerous unsanctioned environment, which threatens their health and safety (Goodyear et al., 2005; Blankenship and Koester, 2002).

The relationship between negative health outcomes and activities such as panhandling and salvaging recyclable materials (binning) may appear less direct. However, major urban cities, including the City of Vancouver, Canada, have identified such activities as potential economic threats to urban cores as some citizens report feeling unsafe around individuals engaging in these activities and therefore may avoid affected areas. Similarly, there are concerns that a high prevalence of panhandling and binning threatens the public image of affected cities and thereby has the potential to deter tourism and foreign investment (City of Vancouver, 2006). In a number of major cities in North America (e.g., Toronto, Atlanta, Baltimore, Cincinnati, New Haven, New York City, Philadelphia, Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle) policy makers have introduced legislation to increase the ability of law enforcement to arrest and prosecute individuals for panhandling and engaging in other undesirable behavior (New York State Law, 2006; Safe Streets Act, 1999).

While previous studies have identified prohibited income generation among injection drug users (IDU) (Sherman and Latkin, 2002), there have been few studies that have assessed the characteristics of IDU who engage in such activities. As well, there have been few studies that have detailed the amount of income derived from various prohibited sources and examined the role of ongoing drug use in perpetuating engagement in different prohibited income generating activities. Therefore, we sought to explore the prevalence of and factors associated with engaging in prohibited income generating activities among a community-recruited cohort of IDU. We also sought to shed light on the relationship between the costs associated with purchasing illegal substances and motivations for engaging in prohibited income generating activity among IDU.

2. Methods

Beginning in May 1996, persons who had injected illegal drugs in the previous month were recruited into the Vancouver Injection Drug User Study (VIDUS), a prospective cohort study that has been described in detail previously (Tyndall et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2001). Briefly, persons were eligible for the VIDUS study if they had injected illegal drugs at least once in the previous month, resided in the greater Vancouver region, and provided written informed consent. At baseline and semi-annually subjects provided blood samples and completed an interviewer-administered questionnaire. Participants receive \$20 for each study visit. The questionnaire elicits demographic data as well as information about drug use, income sources, HIV risk behavior and drug treatment. The study has been approved by the University of British Columbia's Research Ethics Board. The present analysis is restricted to those participants who were actively injecting drugs and seen for follow-up during the period June, 2005 to December, 2005. Analysis variables are available only for this sample period.

Respondents were asked to identify all income sources over the past 30 days. Categories of income sources included; social assistance (including disability, pensions and other forms of government transfers), family and friends, paid work (including under the table employment), binning (includes salvaging recyclable materials), sex trade work, drug dealing, criminal activity (category encompasses remaining criminal activity including theft, break and entry, robbery, fraud, etc.) and panhandling. Respondents were then asked "If you didn't need the money to pay for your drug use, are there any sources of income in the last 30 days that you would eliminate?". Those who responded 'yes' were then asked to indicate the specific income sources they would choose to eliminate.

To assess the prevalence of, and determine factors associated with, participation in prohibited income generating activities the categories for sex trade work, drug dealing, criminal activity, binning and panhandling were combined into a separate category titled 'prohibited activities', which served as a dependent variable of interest for subsequent analyses. However, we also considered a second dependent variable, which consisted of only sex trade work, drug dealing and other criminal activity as a means of determining if there were meaningful differences when the less risky activities of binning and panhandling were excluded from the analysis.

Socio-demographic variables of interest considered in analyses included: age (per year older), gender (female versus male), ethnicity (aboriginal versus non-aboriginal) and homelessness (defined as having no fixed address for the last 6 months). Behavioral and drug use variables, based on activities in the last 6 months, included: frequent heroin injection (consistently injecting once or more per day), frequent cocaine injection (consistently injecting once or more per day), frequent crack use (consistently smoking once or more per day), syringe borrowing (at some time in last 6 months), syringe lending (at some time in last 6 months), enrolment in any addiction treatment program (at some time in last 6 months) and injecting in public spaces (defined as having at some time in the last 6 months injected on public streets, in alleys, public washrooms, parks and abandoned buildings). All definitions have been used previously (Wood et al., 2001).

For the primary analysis, univariate and multivariate statistics were used to determine factors associated with engaging in any prohibited activity. In univariate analysis categorical explanatory variables were analyzed using Pearson's χ^2 -test and continuous variables were analyzed using the Wilcoxon rank sum test. To evaluate factors independently associated with engaging in any prohibited activity, all variables of interest were entered into a fixed multivariate logistic regression model. Using the same independent variables of interest, a separate logistic regression model was constructed to examine factors associated with only the more restricted set of riskier prohibited activities (i.e., sex trade work, drug dealing and other criminal activities). We also assessed all two-way interactions.

In sub analyses, three separate linear regression models, which included the same independent variables of interest, were constructed to identify factors predicting the amount of income generated through prohibited activities, as well as predictors of the number of days in the last month spent involved in drug dealing and sex trade work, respectively. In further sub analyses, we constructed two separate logistic regression models seeking to identify predictors of willingness to give up sex trade work and willingness to give up drug dealing.

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